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A Critical Appraisal of Anti- Child Trafficking Discourse and Policy in Southern Benin

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical overview of anti- child trafficking discourse and policy in Southern Benin. The paper examines the major trends in interventions pioneered by the dominant institutional actors in the field, and looks at the discursive background against which they are formed. The paper contrasts mainstream policy and discourse with the alternative narratives and policy suggestions pertaining at the level of the communities who find themselves targeted by the anti-trafficking establishment. It offers suggestions for the improvement of policy.

Keywords

anti-trafficking policy, child trafficking, child work, child migration, Benin

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Introduction

'People say don't move, movement is bad, then they promise to help us if we stay here but they bring us nothing... We can't eat their words can we?'

(Woman in Tenga Village, 16/4/10)²

This is a story of contested social policy formation. It dates from July of 2005, when I began working with a Beninese Child Rights NGO in Cotonou and found myself immediately exposed to governmental, donor and non-governmental concern at the apparent 'problems' of child migration and trafficking. Struck then as I am now by the tensions between the *lived* and *represented* realities of current and former child migrants, my research has been designed to explore the creation, operation and consequences of these tensions. It focuses both on how the institutional (mis-) understandings of children and their movement are established and propagated, and on why the policies that arise from these (mis-)understandings continue to be implemented apace, despite their apparent failings.

In what follows, I offer a brief outline of some of the findings from my doctoral fieldwork. These are based principally on an analysis of primary interview and participant observation data, but are underpinned by an examination of secondary, policy documentation and an exploration of the relevant academic literature. The paper presents a schematic overview of the nature of anti-trafficking policy as pursued and experienced in Benin, it highlights a number of the various interlinking discourses that underpin the deployment of this policy, and it addresses the way those upon whom it acts resist its effects and disprove its base assumptions.

Research Context and Methodological Overview

Child³ trafficking began to emerge as a 'problem issue' in Benin at the start of the last decade. Though child labour had long been a focus of international and national attention within the country, child trafficking arrived to displace it as the central preoccupation with the development in Geneva of the 'Palermo (or Trafficking) Protocol'. The explosion of research, political rhetoric and funding that followed the drafting of this Protocol meant that 'trafficking', as a law enforcement and human rights issue, occupied an ever more important position on the international agenda, and it was this agenda which transposed itself wholesale to Benin with the advent of the 'Etireno Affair' in May 2001.

The Etireno was a Nigerian trawler used by a gang of people-smugglers to illegally transport Beninese and other West African children to Gabon, where they were destined to work in various Gabonese industries. After a night raid, the Gabonese authorities uncovered the smuggling ring and refused to let the Etireno dock in

² All names of individuals, institutions and villages have been either changed or anonymised to protect the identity of informants. Details can be provided on request. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from French are my own.

³ Though I consider 'children' and 'childhood' to be situational concepts varying according to time, place, culture and social structure, amongst other things (James and Prout 1997, Mann 2001, Cunningham 2006, O'Connell Davidson and Farrow 2007), the institutional literature and policy I am examining take 'children' to be those under the biological age of 18 and 'childhood' thus to be the period before one reaches that age. Since I am reflecting on the appropriateness of these institutional understandings and policies, I have decided to engage with them on their own terms, and have therefore used the same criteria throughout this study.

Libreville, ordering the captain to return his passengers to Cotonou. The captain instead tried to return the ship to his native Cameroon in order to flee impending prosecution and in the process a multi-country diplomatic crisis ensued, as no country would allow the ship to dock, resulting in its passengers remaining stranded at sea in difficult conditions for a number of days. This, in turn, prompted the world's media to descend on the Gulf of Guinea and led both to a flurry of high-profile reports on 'the slave ship' that heralded the uncovering of 'a modern-day slave trade' (see, for example, *The Independent*, 18 April 2001), and to the identification of Benin as 'the epicentre' of the international traffic in children as 'source, destination and transit country'.

Shamed by the coverage it was receiving and pressured (or attracted) by the influx of money and expertise from the international child protection community, Benin's government quickly ratified the Palermo Protocol and, together with its partners, set about establishing a policy that would tackle the country's apparently 'endemic' child trafficking problem. As with elsewhere in the world, 'trafficking' was defined as any component of the process that coupled 'movement + exploitation', and 'exploitation' was taken to include any work 'unacceptable' for a child and from which a third party derives a profit (as per the ILO's anti- child labour framework). That this policy would prove less than ideal, however, became quickly apparent, and it will be the purpose of the remainder of this paper to offer part of an explanation as to why.

The research that underpins this paper consists of 14 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, during which I conducted over 180 interviews with more than 300 people and observed and worked with individuals and institutions at every level of the anti-trafficking policy chain. I focussed at the institutional level on those bodies that are most active in forming and implementing anti-trafficking policy in Cotonou and throughout Benin more widely. These include UNICEF and the ILO, from among the IOs working in this field, USAID, USDOL, DANIDA, the EU and France, from the donor community, the Family and Justice Ministries, from within the Beninese government, and a collection of national and international NGOs.

In total, I spent almost a year engaged with these institutions. Aside from gathering crucially relevant documentary and observational data with these bodies, I interviewed over 100 people at the institutional level, and my interviews focussed on how and why policies and projects are established and represented, the nature of the institutional research process, inter- and intra- institutional dynamics and constraints, understandings of childhood, child work and migration, views on the role of the state, and more.

At the 'community' level, I chose to concentrate my research entirely in the South of the country, for a number of reasons. Firstly, I recognised that it would have been logistically impossible to cover the entire length of Benin in any ethnographic depth over the course of multi-country doctoral fieldwork. Secondly, I was aware that, despite their differences, the four principal ethnic groups of the South (Adja, Fon, Minan and Yoruba) have historically been seen to comprise one broad ethno-cultural and economic region, the '*Adjatado*' (see, for example, Savary 1976). Thirdly, and by far most importantly, I was motivated by the knowledge that, in Benin, the 'hub' of child labour, trafficking and exploitation has been widely identified as the poor, principally agricultural Zou Department, from which children frequently leave to

work in the artisanal mines/ gravel pits of Abeokuta in Western Nigeria. Within this department, two communes – Zakpota and Zogbodomey – have been identified as particularly ‘effected’ by the above-mentioned ‘phenomenon’ and various national and international studies with child migrant labourers and ‘victims of trafficking’ have identified several villages therein as key source-locations, resulting in their becoming major foci for national and international interventions. I thus selected four case study villages, two from each commune, two with flagship ‘village child protection committees’ and two without.

In the villages, I used various participatory techniques, including principally open-ended individual and group interviews, the focus of which were on how people see their life-worlds, how they experience and view (hazardous) child work and movement, what they have to say about current anti-trafficking interventions, and how they would like to see those interventions change. In total, I interviewed 109 adults and 61 children from these villages and the wider Zou Department. Additionally, I interviewed 15 adults and 28 children from various other locations in Southern Benin, the majority of whom were interviewed as part of my Masters fieldwork in 2007, before my final field sites were determined.

Of the children I spoke with, at least 50 either were or had been child labour migrants. The majority of these were adolescent males who had moved from my case study villages to work in the Nigerian mines, though I also interviewed a number of migrant boys in Cotonou and former female migrants in a Cotonou shelter. Dozens of adults I spoke with had also previously migrated for work, many when they were still children. I therefore collected a large number of migration histories, including many with children defined institutionally as ‘victims of trafficking’ or benefiting from state/institutional intervention as a result of their ‘vulnerability’ thereto.

The Discourse(s)

The discourses underpinning anti-trafficking policy in Benin are complex, contradictory, and often contested. Given the space available, it will be impossible to offer a comprehensive analysis of each of them in all their nuanced detail. What this section will provide, however, is an overview of three of the central (and most nefarious) tropes that I believe to be at the core of the anti-trafficking policy directed from Cotonou. These have been identified both because of their centrality to policy construction and because they permeate at once the vast majority of the institutional documentation on the topic *and* the language of those individuals key to the field.

Child ‘exceptionalism’

Policy-makers active in Benin (or in the creation of Benin’s policies) almost universally agree that individuals under the age of 18 form a special category of humanity that requires specialised treatment. This treatment broadly equates to protection against an apparently inherent vulnerability, but it also includes stringent stipulations for what types of experience are appropriate and which are not, what rights are forthcoming and which are not, and what paths a person must follow if they are to develop ‘normally’. The general trend of policy-maker views is that under-18’s should be in school or in an apprenticeship, residing with their families, and engaged only in light, family-based work.

An illustration of these understandings comes with Darlene, a senior IO figure in the international fight against trafficking, who indicated quite clearly that ‘there is a difference between people older and younger than 18’ (Interview, 4/9/9), or with Gidi, a senior Beninese government official, who explained that ‘people are finally understanding what it means to be a child’, which, for her, included being with one’s family and attending school, but not being engaged in physically taxing labour (Interview, 11/3/10). These views were paralleled by those of Jeffrey, a senior IO figure, who explained that ‘in an ideal world, all kids would go to school’ (Interview, 8/6/9), while Veronica, a local level Beninese state official, extended this further, telling me that people under 18 are children, they are still developing and, as such, even if they are not in school and want to leave home for work, they must not be permitted to do so (Interview, 7/4/10). Why, one may ask? Because, in the words of Cyril, ‘when we send children away, they end up missing out. As such, it’s better if a child stays here. That way he has more chance of developing correctly, of becoming a man tomorrow’ (Interview with Cyril, Beninese Government Representative, Local Level, 7/4/10).

Such understandings of what a childhood should look like of course reflect what has been termed the new ‘globalised childhood’ (Boyden 1997; Thorsen 2007). This phrase refers to the way norms pertaining to the social, cultural, economic and historic context of the West have been extrapolated to form the basis of the international child rights regime and the putatively universal, ‘normal’ childhood it promotes. That ‘globalised childhood’ is itself reflected in precisely the international and national legal norms promoted by those quoted above and adopted by Benin. It includes the core texts of the ILO’s anti-child labour framework (Conventions 138 and 182 [ILO 1973 and 1999]) and the Palermo Protocol.

Migration as the key problem

The view that (child) migration is generally negative is widespread within Benin’s policy world and is emphatically underlined by the broad tendency of the policy literature to conflate the process with ‘trafficking’, with Benin apparently a place from, to and through which the young are trafficked. One classic example of this is the 2002 report by the Beninese Family Ministry and the Danish Embassy which aimed at developing ‘a strategy to combat *migration and trafficking* in the Zou region’ of Southern Benin (MFPSS and ARD, emphasis added). In this report, the reader is told that migration has a historic precedent in this part of the country. Immediately thereafter, however, the text slips imperceptibly into a discussion of recent trafficking trends and concludes that ‘the problem persists still today in the form of child placement’ (ibid.1), leaving the reader with the impression of a certain conceptual interchangeability between the two. This interchangeability is present also at the level of the language policy-makers use. When I asked one NGO representative whether it was a positive thing that people in Benin are so mobile, she responded, ‘No. We must eliminate *trafficking* because it stops children evolving. They do too much work and are mistreated when they leave’ (Interview with Tata, 7/4/10).

My interviews suggest that this conceptual interchange is the result of more than just confusion. As is the case elsewhere in the world (Hashim 2003, Whitehead et al., O’Connell Davidson and Farrow 2007, Castle and Diarra 2003), child migration is

consistently depicted here as a negative phenomenon *per se*, particularly as it is seen to work against individual and local economic and social development. As such, Celestin explained to me that his work comprises going into villages to tell communities that child departures ‘inhibit local development’ (Interview with Celestin, Beninese Government Representative, Local Level, 6/4/10), while Veronica argued that ‘if children stay...they help develop their villages and we avoid the rural exodus’ (Interview, 7/4/10). Perhaps most emphatically, Alec, a Beninese IO employee at the very heart of the government’s policy, put his opposition to migration in these terms:

‘We need to evolve. Even if this is against our culture, we must change. This is part of globalisation and we have to leave behind our primitive ways. We can’t just go back to the jungle.’

(Interview, 23/2/10)

Parents of migrant children are ignorant and irresponsible

If migration and particularly the child’s migratory departure from the family home are seen as so squarely negative by the Beninese anti-trafficking policy world, it stands to reason that structural causes might be assumed to be at the root of most of those departures. Indeed they are, but though most actors involved in Benin’s anti-trafficking policy cite ‘poverty’ as a major, if not the major, explanatory factor, the transition from poverty to exploitation/trafficking is often seen as facilitated by (or indeed dependent upon) the ignorance and irresponsibility of rural Beninese parents. As the country’s ‘National Child Trafficking Study’ highlights, ‘poverty is by far the major cause of children’s vulnerability to trafficking’, but since ‘not all poor households are prepared to send their children away’, we must also consider questions of ‘responsible parenthood’, ‘poor family planning’, ‘polygamy’, and the propensity of ‘naïve’ villagers to be ‘duped’ by wily traffickers as important underlying dynamics (MFE and UNICEF Benin, 2007:7/8).

Such pathologising is not confined solely to the literature. Across the cadre class in Benin, the view of rural parenting practices is unambiguously negative. One local official blamed ‘laziness’ for the parental acceptance of child mobility (Interview with Celestin, 6/4/10), while another explained that it is because ‘parents here just don’t want to look after their kids’ (Interview with Cynthia, Beninese Government Representative, Local Level, 38/8/07). Similarly, Ayala, a former Beninese government minister, told me that ‘parents simply aren’t aware of their responsibilities’ (Interview, 13/3/10), while with Jemima, I had the following exchange:

Neil: Why do you think that people here want to leave or send their children away?

Jemima: That is a very pertinent question. We say it is “poverty, poverty”, but this isn’t true. People just don’t want to work...

(Interview with Jemima, Beninese Government Representative, Local Level, 17/3/10).

The Policies⁴

*‘People don’t realise how important our Ministry is –
we are here to change people’s behaviour’.*

(Interview with Salama, 11/3/10)

Given the discursive tropes outlined above, it is perhaps unsurprising that anti-trafficking policy in Benin has adopted very interventionist tendencies, focussing near exclusively on promoting widespread *behavioural change*, through the expansion of what Foucault would term ‘disciplinary’ and ‘productive’ power. Though space does not allow for an extended exposé of the full complexity of Foucauldian power analysis, I will briefly outline how I understand and employ his concepts of ‘discipline’ and ‘production’, before explaining how I believe them to characterise the two dominant trends in Benin’s anti-trafficking policy.

For Foucault, the development of pervasive surveillance techniques represented the key hallmark of modern authority, rendering the operation of state rule at once more efficient and more effective (1984a:34). Control through observation (rather than by example), he argues, became a staple of modern ‘governmentality’, because - as he illustrated in his famous analysis of Bentham’s ‘panopticon’ - he who is able to see everything, can control and *discipline* everything (1977). This all-seeing authority is integral also to his second conception of power – as a *productive*, generative system, constituting subjects (in both senses) on a wide scale. “[Power] needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body”, he explains (1984b:119), generating *self-governing* individual subjectivities through mechanisms of consciousness formation, including the instilling of fear by the all-seeing authority, but also including the transfer of values held to be of importance by that authority. In what follows, I will suggest that Benin’s anti-trafficking policy fits squarely within these two paradigms.

Discipline

Though its proponents will point to constructive elements such as the (small-scale) roll-out of micro-credit or the (incomplete) introduction of free primary schooling, by far the major emphasis of Benin’s anti-trafficking strategy has been on the reduction of child movement as *a pre-emptive tool to prevent eventual exploitation and thus trafficking*. This has been attempted through a number of measures, including the strengthening of border patrols, enhanced cooperation with Nigeria on the surveillance of trans-border movements, and the establishment of what were originally known as ‘village vigilance committees’ to perform the state’s work at community level by putting a stop to child departures.

That movement-reduction has indeed been the goal of this cluster of measures was made abundantly clear to me in countless discussions with policy-makers. Gidi, a senior Beninese government official, bluntly stated that ‘we need to stop kids leaving

⁴ In truth, the anti-trafficking policies pursued in Benin exist in symbiosis with their discourses, each feeding (off) the other and neither taking temporal precedent. I have separated the two, however, in the interests of clarity and aware of the constraints imposed by a paper of this length.

– what will they do if they're not with their families?' (Interview, 11/3/10), while her colleague, Salama, admitted that 'it's true that we limit child movement, but that's because when children move they normally end up in situations of abuse. Indeed, the consequence of movement is so often exploitation that we make the assimilation between movement and trafficking' (Interview, 11/3/10).

Nowhere is this assimilation more apparent than in the government's foremost initiative to tackle trafficking – the 2006 Law Regulating the Movement of Minors and Suppressing the Traffic in Children (Loi N° 2006-04). Draconian in the extreme, this law, like the Palermo Protocol, institutionalises the constraints on children's movement-related agency. Just as the UN instrument considers any action involved in the process of exploiting a child's migrant labour to constitute 'trafficking', *irrespective of whether or not the child has consented to that exploitation*, so Benin's national law establishes that children cannot legally be displaced within the borders of the country unless accompanied either by a direct parent or guardian or with the consent of a local government official. So difficult has this instrument made it for illiterate rural populations to legally travel with their children, that it has in fact resulted in serious jail terms for uncles, cousins and other relatives moving children without the requisite permit (Field Notes 2007). When I sought clarification with one government official over whether this had simply been the result of judicial heavy-handedness, this was the exchange we had:

Neil: Is [the law] practicable though? How can a poor, illiterate villager get together the money and documents necessary to legally place his child?

Deg: That's the point. It isn't practicable. The goal is to ban placement. You can't tell the difference between placement and trafficking anyway, so we need to ban it all.'

(Interview with Deg, 10/3/10)

Produce

Despite the fact that the Beninese government (and many of its institutional partners) would apparently like to be able to totally regulate (or stifle) child movement, policy-makers are acutely aware that the resources for this kind of surveillance are lacking. As such, a major component of the national anti-trafficking strategy is to change peasant consciousness through widespread 'sensitisation' and 'responsibilisation' drives. These include massive radio, television and road-side poster campaigns aimed at persuading people to have less children (because less children means less poverty, better cared for children, and less child departures), to encourage parents to keep their children in school (because school-going children are better protected, more likely to develop 'correctly', and less likely to leave) and, of course, to prevent their children from leaving home to work.

Most importantly, however, these drives involve engaging local NGOs and the state's arm in the village – 'the Committee' – to reformulate peasant opinions so that they 'understand' movement as negative. Salama explained in detail the history and work of these committees:

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‘We thought that if we really want to fight trafficking, we need to involve the communities themselves, so we decided to try and install local committees in each and every village. They have evolved now and look more holistically at child protection and child well-being, so these days they are called ‘village child protection committees’. Currently we are in 30 out of 67 national communes, totalling 1696 villages. They work on informing the population about the law, sensitising people against movement, encouraging school, etc’.

(Interview, 11/3/10)

This explanation was confirmed by Cliff, himself the head of Sehere’s village committee. ‘We have been given loud-speakers to shout out sensitisation’, he said, ‘and we try to explain to people why leaving is bad’. In order to underline that message, he continued, ‘we patrol the paths that people use to leave the village, and stop children in cars we know to be going to Nigeria’ (Interview, 7/4/10). Cliff’s admission is supported by various pieces of rarely seen documentation relating to the operation of the committees. In one document, collating committee ‘plans of action’, we learn that committee goals are to ‘sensitise’, to ‘denounce and dissuade’, and to provide ‘social surveillance’ regarding child movement (MFFPS and UNICEF Benin 2006). Importantly, plans of action for villages *including those in which I worked* list as their major activities anti-movement sensitization, as well as ‘interception of [departing] children’ [ibid].

The View From Below

In this section of the paper, I intend to set the understandings of the dominant discourse and its related policy against the alternative understandings of childhood, child work, migration and ‘trafficking’ that predominate at the level of the communities with whom I researched in Southern Benin. I will demonstrate how far the discourse diverges from representative accuracy and will thus call into question the policy on which it is based.

Childhood and the value of work

Though for many in the policy-making community, the delineation between ‘adult’ and ‘child’ is clearly drawn at the biological age of 18 (with the years before 18 designated as a protective, economically inactive period) the rural Beninese with whom I lived and worked define things altogether differently.

Firstly, the transition from child to adult is neither fixed, nor universally attributed to age. In response to the question ‘at what point do you become an adult here?’, I received answers as varied as ‘it depends on how much land you farm’ and ‘when you are married’, but the one common thread that ran through every one of my responses was the attainment of economic independence. In one group interview, a teenage boy explained with the agreement of his peers that one is a man in this community when ‘he works and eats without the help of his parents, when he is self-sufficient’ (Interview with Group 11, Tenga Village, 14/5/10), and his assessment was echoed by an adult in a neighbouring village, who declared that to be a man there meant ‘to

farm, to have a big harvest, and to be able to sell your crops' (Interview with Pietro, Zelele Village, 10/5/10).

Clearly, these perspectives highlight the critical importance of the material in a space where survival is precarious and farming is the primary economic activity. The following humorous extract does the same:

'Neil: NGOs, white people and the government come here and say that at 13 or 14 you are still a child and shouldn't work. Why do they have a different opinion to you?

Multiple respondents: Because their stomachs are full.'

(Interview with Group 6, Atomè Village, 28/4/10)

A second major difference between the policy-making and rural communities is that where child work is viewed by the former as a negative hindrance to child development, in the rural villages I studied the opposite was in fact the case. Both children and adults in the Zou Department see children's economic participation as a natural familial necessity and a crucial aspect of socialisation (see also Bledsoe 1990 and Boyden and Levison 2000). It is widely believed that progressively engaging the young in work (with full participation expected when a child is physically strong enough – usually by their mid-teens) plays a crucial role in preparing an individual to become a constructive member of the community. Indeed, those who do not work are stigmatised and associated with theft, since survival is a collective endeavour in this socio-centric space (Interview with Group 6, Atomè Village, 28/4/10). As such, work is valued, and even enjoyed. When I asked a group of young people whether they worked and how they felt about it, I received a cacophony of 'yesses', with the addendum 'because it feeds us!' (Interview with Group 12, Atomè Village, 14/5/10).

This attitude also underpins community understandings of exploitation. While the anti-trafficking establishment posits entire sectors of work as adult domains that are illegitimate for children (with child participation deemed *inherently* exploitative), in the villages 'exploitation' depends fundamentally on the nature of an individual's work experience. As such, I found a radical difference between the official designation of the work adolescent boys perform in the gravel pits of Abeokuta as 'trafficking' and the understanding those boys and their communities have of that work. In interview after interview, people complained about the nature of the official narrative. 'The state, white people, NGOs, they all come here and say don't let your kids leave for Abeokuta because what they experience there is *slavery*', I was told. 'NGOs call everything slavery...to stop kids leaving', Charley continued (Interview, Zelele Village, Zakpota, 19/4/10), while Artur grumbled that 'officials misunderstand everything and mix it all up into slavery', (Interview, Sehere Village, Zakpota, 12/4/10).

Child labour migration to the Nigerian gravel pits is consistently being translated by the authorities at ground-level as 'kanoumon' – the Fon word for 'slavery', deployed here as a synonym for 'trafficking'. Such is the local frustration with how far removed this designation remains from people's lived experiences of gravel digging, that when I asked one group of men with knowledge of the pits how they themselves defined the

work that teenage boys do there, I received a genuinely emotional round of applause as ‘the first person from outside to have ever come here and posed us this question’ (Group 2 Interview, Southern Benin, 12/4/10). Their reaction was not unique. Without fail, amid many expressions of frustration, I learned that nobody defined work in the gravel pits as ‘kanoumon’; rather, it is predominantly seen as an acceptable, if challenging, activity that *can*, at times, constitute ‘afoutame’, or ‘exploitation’, especially if workers are asked to perform beyond their reasonable capacity. My interview with Petrov was indicative in this regard:

Neil: What was the work like there?

Petrov: Very hard, very physically demanding. Plus it meant being under the sun all day. And, when you’re sick, the boss moans because it means he’s losing money, so if you don’t get well again you just get sent home, because you are expensive.

Neil: Do you define this as exploitation?

Petrov: Yes and no, it depends. It can be, if you’re asked to do too much, and seeing as wages are so relatively low, but then we do agree to them, and we are looked after. Sometimes we refuse to work too hard as well.

Neil: Did you make friends there?

Petrov: Yes, loads. I could be working here and then I’ll have my pal working over there by that tree, and another by that bush. There are loads of kids from around here and they are always bantering whilst working, just as they all eat together at meal times. Daily life there is ok.

Neil: Are you happier here?

Petrov: Yes, but there was also good, there was a good atmosphere. Plus, if you do five or six years and get on with your boss, he will show you the ropes and you can then become a boss yourself’.

(Interview, Zelele Village, Zakpota, 10/5/10)

Migration

While, as was demonstrated above, migration is largely demonised by those responsible for Benin’s anti-trafficking policy, and while that migration is conflated broadly with trafficking, in the villages I examined it is seen in much less negative terms. In fact, where the policy-world propagates the discourse that migration hinders local as well as individual development, many of the villagers I spoke to held precisely the opposite opinion. Time and again, in explaining why leaving for the gravel pits was a constructive choice despite the physical hardships of the labour involved, I was told by young males that doing so allows you to return and, amongst other things, (metaphorically) ‘put a roof on your father’s house’. Tim, for example, is a ‘boss’ in one of Abeokuta’s gravel pits and periodically returns to Zakpota to visit his family and collect young relatives and village acquaintances to bring back to work with him. When he first went to work in the pits as a teenager, he said, his goal was to earn some money and put a roof on his father’s house; now he sees himself as facilitating the same for the next generation (Interview, Southern Benin, 30/8/7). Pietro is an example of that generation. Having first migrated at the age of 17 with his family in mind, he returned four years later to hand over his wages to his father, who kept a portion for the family and used the rest to build Pietro his own hut (Interview, Zelele Village, Zakpota, 10/5/10).

Such selflessness is widespread, but it should not obscure the important *individual* ambition that is also encapsulated by a child's decision to migrate. Petrov, for example, told me that, after his father died, he left for the gravel pits in the face of great protest from his mother, because she did not have enough money to keep him in school and because he therefore wanted to 'move on' in his life (Interview, Zelele Village, Zakpota, 10/5/10). Similarly for Didier, it was the desire to learn and develop transferable skills, combined with his boredom at school, that encouraged him to leave (Interview, Southern Benin, 22/8/7), while for another boy from a nearby village it was the promise of a long-coveted motorcycle that sealed his departure (Group 11 Interview, Tenga Village, Zogbodomey, 14/5/10).

This reflects the widely-held view here that opportunity and monetary resources are concentrated elsewhere than 'at home'. Indeed, and not without good reason, children's perceptions of migrant destination centres, (Cotonou, Nigeria or 'yovotome' – 'the home of the white man') underline the notion that 'elsewhere' represents a land of opportunity, a place where life is materially richer than 'here', and where one can and must go if one seeks to advance. The following extract offers a further flavour of this understanding:

'Atomè Village. 14/5/10. We have gathered round in the square at the heart of the village. Myself, W., about 15 teenage boys, and four or five girls aged 13-16.

What do you think of when we say "Cotonou"?

Boys:

- it's a big town that people go to.
- it makes me think of business.
- it's an economic centre and is where people go to find things.
- it is choc-a-bloc full of NGOs and their projects, which we would like to see come here.

Girls:

- traffic lights, big roads, things that are there but not here.
- electricity.

What about "yovotome"?

Boys:

- there are only whites over there, that is where they are from.
- many machines.
- big, beautiful buildings.
- cold weather with strong winds.

Girls:

- aeroplanes.

How do you know that money is elsewhere and that leaving will help you get it?

Girls:

- we have relatives who are well-off in Cotonou and when they come back here to visit we can see that they are living much better than us.

Boys:

- we see it on the TV, on the serials, the teachers tell us that there is great wealth in Europe, and when a peasant goes away to sell his goods he quickly returns with lots of money.'

(Group 12 Interview, Atomè Village, Zogbodomey, 14/5/10)

These children's perceptions are evidently quite acute. Despite the establishment claim that 'home' is where children should be, it is patently clear that economic wealth is concentrated in large urban centres relative to the countryside, in Nigeria relative to Benin, and in the West relative to sub-Saharan Africa. Unsurprisingly, then, such notions of 'elsewhere' as a land of opportunity are not confined only to my child interviewees, or indeed only to the rural poor. In fact, large-scale work by the UNDP in Benin on rural and urban perceptions of poverty and socio-economic well-being echo clearly what I found in my interviews. In one study conducted with a series of rural and urban communities in the South of the country, both populations saw themselves as relatively poor, both saw one's own location as synonymous with negative economic prospects and both saw various alternative destinations as embodying opportunity (PNUD and MPD 1995; 1996). This fundamentally underpins the choice to migrate for work and puts the lie to Benin's depiction as a 'source, destination and transit' country for traffickers. Rather, Benin is a place where people are constantly on the move, since mobility is the key to accessing resources.

Concluding Discussion and Policy Recommendations

By this point in the discussion, it should be clear quite how inaccurate is the discursive claim that 'trafficking' and child labour migration result principally from the ignorance and irresponsible parenting of the rural poor. Indeed, it might reasonably be argued that it is the policy-maker class who could be accused of ignorance and a lack of responsibility for consistently failing to understand or address the economic conditions underpinning child work and mobility.

It is true that no major, statistically representative, study exists to determine the success or failure of dominant anti-trafficking strategy in achieving its goal of protecting children by pre-emptively preventing their movement. My qualitative research, however, indicates very clearly that the rural poor actively and consciously *ignore* or *undermine* efforts to that end. As such, I found myself frequently party to comedic discussions of the 'stupidity' of the state, with villagers admitting that they 'put on a show' for those who try to persuade them not to leave/let their children leave, and revealing how frequently they get around the state's feeble attempts to prevent them from doing so.

None of this should imply, however, that the communities with whom I researched do not recognise that often the migrant labour their children engage in can be exploitative or very difficult. While the discourse does fundamentally fail to reflect the empirics of their experience, it is not the case that child migrant labour, particularly to the mines, is always and everywhere unproblematic. Far from it. Many former migrant gravel pit

workers admitted to me that their work had been hard, and many intimated that they felt they deserved better pay for what they did. This points to the importance of the anti-trafficking establishment exploring two further policy angles, which community answers to the question 'what would you like to see anti-trafficking policy do?' consistently highlighted. These are:

- 1) Outside investment in the provision of local economic alternatives to labour migration.
- 2) Improvement of labour standards and labour protection for those that have migrated to work.

As we have seen, the 'globalised childhood' of the policy establishment is not matched by the childhood which values work and community participation in the villages in which I researched. Attempting thus to promote such a childhood, without changing the economic structure within which it exists, is unlikely to bear fruit. Children work in this region because they need to and their work is individually and collectively valued, with the tipping point between 'work' and 'exploitation' significantly more finely nuanced than in the rigid, aged-based binary structure of policy-maker norms. If policy-makers do genuinely wish to protect children from what they experience as exploitative then, investment is needed in expanding labour inspectorates and engaging in child workplaces to ensure that children (as much as the adults alongside whom they work) are able to work with dignity. In similar fashion, economic investment is needed to ensure that these children and their families are able to access the money that is central to all life in a capitalist market economy without having to migrate to find it. It is, once again, futile to demand/suggest that people stay 'at home' when staying at home offers no chance for economic advancement. The discursive and policy establishment thus needs to change its modus operandi - it is time to work *with* rather than *on* the poor communities it seeks to protect.

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